

David of Sassoun
Critical Studies on the Armenian Epic

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THE HISTORY AND ENIGMA OF THE ARMENIAN EPIC¹

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History

For a millennium or more the Armenia epic or epics known as *Sasna tsrer*, roughly “The Different Ones of Sassoun,”² or by a second title, *David of Sassoun*, was passed down in oral form from generation to generation around Lake Van, especially in the area of Sassoun. In the century since its discovery it has been transformed from an indigenous, regional tale to the national epic of all Armenians. No literary Armenian source, however, from the fifth to the nineteenth century, knows of David or any of the epic’s principal characters.

¹ This introduction was presented as the first paper in the symposium and thus did not take into consideration some of the ideas presented in the subsequent papers.

² No satisfactory translation can be given in English. The word *tsour* means bent, therefore different than straight, than normal. It has been variously translated as Daredevil, Foolhardy, Madcap; most recently Peter Cowe has opted for “Daredevils” (first made popular by Leon Surmelian) in his translation of Azat Yeghiazaryan, *Daredevils of Sasun: Poetics of an Epic* (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2008), originally published in Armenian (Erevan, 1999). I find this unsatisfactory because the sense is different, more like people who dare to think and act differently than the mass of society: iconoclasts, non-conformists, independent beings, or actors. The heroes, because of their extraordinary traits, are different from other mortal beings. These qualities are not just unusual physical force and prowess, but an unswerving moral steadfastness and honor far above that attained by ordinary individuals.

2 The History and Enigma of the Armenian Epic

The town of Sassoun lies about thirty miles southwest of Lake Van; it borders on the old Armenian province of Vaspourakan, with its ancient capital of Van to the southeast of the lake. A native of Van, Fr. Garegin Srvandztiants', was the first to transcribe the epic as it was recited in 1873 by a village bard named Krpo in the dialect of his native city Moush, located a few miles northwest of Sassoun. The young scholar-priest published this version the following year in Constantinople, the cultural center of Western Armenians. Other variants were quickly gathered and published.³ These were almost never identical and seldom even similar; some reciters knew episodes and characters unknown to others, while names and places were often different. The lengths varied greatly and the number of generations of heroes of Sassoun in the variants was also inconsistent.

The Genocide (1915-1923) committed against the Western Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire by the Young Turk government dealt a devastating blow to the work of collecting folk material such as *David of Sassoun*. By the end of World War I, Sassoun and the area of Vaspourakan were totally cleared of their indigenous Armenian population by murder or deportation. The conditions for the oral perpetuation of the Armenian epic were destroyed. Scholars in the new Soviet Armenia, like Manouk Abeghyan, continued to study the Sassoun material, doubling their effort to preserve whatever could be rescued after the national disaster. In 1936 the first of three volumes of variants to the epic was published by the corresponding branch of the Soviet Academy of Sciences in Armenia.⁴ In 1938 a group of scholars was

³ Garegin Srvandztiants', *Grots' ou brots' ev Sasounts'i Davit' kam Mheri dour* (Literary and Folk and David of Sassoun or Mher's Door) (Constantinople, 1874); literally, "writing-digging," a volume that discusses for the first time the existence of an Armenian folk epic and publishes this first recorded version. The Krpo version was reprinted as variant number one in vol. II, part I (1944) of the variorum edition, for which see the Critical Bibliography in this volume. Among the most famous variants were those of Manouk Abeghyan, *Davit' ou Mher* (David and Mher) (Shoushi, 1889), and Garegin Hovsep'ian, *Sasma (sic) tsrer* (The Daredevils of Sassoun) (Tiflis, 1892).

⁴ Manouk Abeghyan and Karapet Melik'-Ohanjanyan, *Sasna tsrer*, vol. I (Erevan, 1936), 78, 1126, (2) pages; vol. II, part I (Erevan, 1944), 21, 404,

commissioned to prepare a uniform and single work using all known variants, nearly sixty then, for the celebration of the 1,000th anniversary of the creation of the epic. This date was rather arbitrarily set at September 1939.

A committee of specialists was formed to undertake the task. It conceived of its work as a recension of variants following certain rules: 1) to bring together organically related episodes from the different versions, 2) to strive to maintain the prevailing meter and keep a rhythmic uniformity, adding and deleting single words only, 3) to eliminate repetitious sections, and 4) to try to preserve the dialect of the reciters, while making the work dialectically uniform. The scholars' overall intent was to preserve an epic unified in style and narrative, but without distorting or augmenting any part of the oral tradition. In 1939 the result of this cooperative effort of scholars—philologists and linguists for the most part—was published as *David of Sassoun, The Armenian Folk Epic*, a work in four cycles or “branches.”⁵

The cycles tell the story of four successive generations of the heroes of Sassoun. A detailed synopsis of every subsection of each of the four cycles of the Armenian Academy sponsored version is given elsewhere in this volume.⁶ In Cycle One, “Sanasar and Baghdasar,” twins are miraculously born of Tsovinar, the virgin daughter of the king of Armenia. In time they build the fortress city

(1) pages; vol. II, part II (Erevan, 1951), 1004, (2) pages; vol. III, Sargis Harout'ounyan and Arousyak Sahakyan (Erevan, 1979), 583 pages. For the detailed contents of each volume see the Critical Bibliography.

⁵ Manouk Abeghyan, Gevorg Abov, and Aram Ghanalanyan, *Sasounts'i Davit' haykakan zhoghovrdakan epos* (Sasounts'i Davit', Armenian Folk Epic) (Erevan, 1939), XXXI, 382 pages, with an introduction by I. A. Orbeli, pp. IX-XXX, a dictionary of foreign or dialectical words, pp. 375-380, and a dictionary of place names, pp. 381-382. It was reprinted, but completely retypeset to reflect new changes in Armenian orthography, as a second edition (Erevan, 1961), LXIV, 334 pages, with a different and longer introduction by Joseph Orbeli, a translation of his *Armyanskii geroicheskii epos* (Erevan, 1956). See the Critical Bibliography at the end of this volume for more details.

⁶ Dickran Kouymjian, “Sasounts'i Davit': Synopsis of the Official Version of the Armenian Epic,” *infra*, pp. 21-33.

of Sassoun. Baghdasar dies childless,⁷ but Sanasar has three sons: Vergo, Hovan, and Mher. Only the latter has the qualities of his father; he is the central figure of Cycle Two, "Great Mher." The epic as a whole as well as Cycle Three, "Sasounts'i Davit'" or "David of Sassoun," takes its name from Mher's son. David's son is in turn the hero of Cycle Four, "Lesser Mher." He unwittingly fights with his father, who curses Mher to childlessness and deathlessness, and thereby brings the house of Sassoun and the epic to an end.⁸

The four cycles have a number of common features. All the heroes undergo an innocent, but precocious childhood. They all ride the Pegasus-like talking Colt Jalali and use the Lightning Sword after they have reached maturity. All battle against the neighboring enemies of Sassoun and Armenia, continually freeing the local population from servitude and tribute. The heroes undergo superhuman tests to win their respective brides, who are all foreigners, unusually beautiful, and combative.

The central figures of each of the cycles differ in several ways. Sanasar and Baghdasar are of virgin birth. Lesser Mher does not die, but disappears childless with Jalali into the famous Raven's Rock at Lake Van. The two Mhers and David are offsprings of natural births; Sanasar, Baghdasar, and Mher die natural deaths; David is killed; Lesser Mher is deathless. Though all fight the oppressive enemy, it is not always the same one. For Sanasar and Baghdasar it is the Caliph of Baghdad, their own stepfather. Great Mher and David battle against Msra Melik⁹ and his son of the same name. Lesser Mher fights the successors of Msra Melik and at times Byzantine and Christian powers to the west. The heroes of the first and fourth cycles are completely faithful to their wives; both Great Mher and David, however, have illicit affairs, the former with Ismil, wife of

⁷ In some variants Baghdasar also sires children.

⁸ Some variants carry the epic further, see particularly the recension of the entire work made by Dikran Tchitouny, *infra* note 23.

⁹ Msra Melik, the Melik or Ruler of Egypt. I still take this in the literal sense of Egypt and not some vague area. During the Fatimid, Ayyubid, and Mamluk periods, Egypt also ruled Palestine and Syria and was directly involved with Armenians and Armenian affairs. See Angèle Kapoian-Kouymjian, "Le Catholikos Grégoire II le Martyrophile (Vkayaser) et ses pérégrinations," *Bazmavep*, vol. 132, no. 3-4 (1975), pp. 306-325, and *idem*, *L'Égypte vue par des Arméniens* (Paris: Fondation Singer-Polignac, 1988).

Msra Melik, out of which union is born Msra Melik Junior, and David with Ch'meshkik Sultana, fathering a daughter destined to kill him.

The cycles are also very uneven in length, "David of Sassoun" is twice as long as "Sanasar and Baghdasar," which in turn is nearly thrice as long as the cycles of "Mher" and "Lesser Mher." The entire official version of 1939 is rendered in stanzas of blank verse, an epic poem of nearly 12,000 lines.

The Enigma

The enigmatic aspect of the Armenian folk epic derives from the mysterious absence of any reference to it in the long and comparatively rich history of Armenian literature. No satisfactory explanation has yet been given for this neglect of 1,000 years by native authors. There are the traditional reasons of modern scholars: the epic belonged to the folk, the corps of illiterate Armenian villagers, if not disdained by the literary elite represented by the upper clergy and the ruling class, certainly ignored by it. And the corollary pronouncement: the work was never written down by those among whom it was popular because they could neither read nor write. As an epic poem, it was intended to be heard and not read, to be memorized and sung. It was part of the great theater of the peasant class. Finally, it belonged to Sassoun and the nearby areas isolated for long periods from the rest of Armenia.

Yet how is one to explain the use of other oral and epic material by ancient historians such as Movses of Khoren? Whether he wrote in the fifth or a later century, Movses used diverse sources in compiling the origin and progress of the Armenians. Not only does he mention the epic associated with the pagan god Vahagn and another about Artavazd, but he quotes *in extenso* from them. He also cites minstrel songs of the bards of Goghtn. The question is not so much why we find no reference to the epic *David of Sassoun* in Khorenats'i, for it may have been composed, especially Cycle III which discusses David proper, after he wrote, but rather why other, later Armenian historians who knew Movses's method and his interest in oral and folk literature, did not mention or even hint at the existence of an heroic legend of such complexity, length, and evident popularity?

In late medieval Armenian literature poetry becomes very important; it was usually secular. In addition to the love ballads and elegiac songs of the bards, there are also a considerable number of long historical poems. But it is also true that little of this literature is anonymous; the authors are known figures, often clergymen. Popular literature, undoubtedly springing from the folk, also survives in the form of medieval tales. The collections preserved by Vardan Aygekts'i and Mkhit'ar Gosh, contemporaries of the late twelfth-early thirteenth centuries, were probably in part made up of anonymously circulating tales, added to those known from antiquity, and codified by them.¹⁰

Lest it be supposed that this enigma's solution is most easily resolved by suggesting the epic works collected around the title *David of Sassoun* are late creations of the seventeenth, eighteenth, or nineteenth centuries, it perhaps should be emphasized that from both internal and external references the work dates from earlier centuries. The first cycle Sanasar and Baghdasar has its roots in pre-Christian Armenia; the other cycles, especially those devoted to Mher and David, reflect Armenian-Arab relations of the Bagratid period, the ninth to the eleventh centuries.

More tangible evidence of the antiquity of the epic is provided by references from non-Armenian sources. Aram Ter-Ghevondian's essay in this volume takes the work's pedigree back to the twelfth century when it was known to the anonymous Arab author of *The Conquest of Mesopotamia*.¹¹ Later it is known to the Portuguese travelers of the sixteenth century and has echoes in the *Sharaf-Nameh*, a Kurdish epic poem.¹² As suggested elsewhere, events from

¹⁰ Translation of a number of their fables, along with other oral folk material, can be found in Charles Dowsett's book (written under the pseudonym Charles Downing), *Armenian Folk-tales and Fables* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 193-205, for the fables of Vardan and Mkhit'ar.

¹¹ Aram Ter-Ghevondian, "A Twelfth Century Arabic Version of the Armenian Folk Epic *Sasna tsrer*," *infra*, pp. 55-60.

¹² On the Portuguese travelers, see Roberto Gulbenkian and Haïg Berbérien, "La légende de David de Sassoun d'après deux voyageurs portugais du XVI^e siècle," *Revue des études arméniennes*, n.s., vol. VIII (1971), pp. 175-188. For the references in the *Sharaf-Nameh*, see S. Harout'younyan and H. Bart'ikyan, "'Sasna tsrer' ardzagank'nere 'Sharaf-Nameum'" (The

the epic may have even inspired some of the scenes sculpted on the outer facade of the church of the Holy Cross at Aght'amar, built by the order of King Gagik Artsrouni between 915 and 921.¹³

The enigma, however, remains. A work of such great dimensions, devoted to the struggle of national heroes who vanquish the powerful enemies of Sassoun and, thus, Armenia, remained unnoticed or ignored to Armenian letters late into the nineteenth century, well after a strong interest in vernacular language and literature had started.¹⁴ More disturbing, more enigmatic we might say, is the ignorance of specialists of an entire genre. Many scholars, even those who would like to see all the variants of *Sasounts'i Davit'* as part of a single whole, agree that we are probably dealing with more than one epic. A very small minority of the collected variants contains all four cycles. The different tales originated from a number of geographical areas and the details of various cycles point to different epochs. The material, as it existed in the late nineteenth century at the moment of its discovery, suggests clearly that we are confronted with a well-established folk genre.

Echoes of *Sasna tsrer* in the *Sharaf-Nameh*)," *Patma-banasirakan handes* (Historico-philological Journal), vol. 15, no. 2 (1975), pp. 90-104.

¹³ Dickran Kouymjian, "A Rare Example of Medieval Art," *Ararat*, vol. VI, no. 4 (Autumn, 1965), p. 86. Anthony Bryer had independently suggested strong relationships between the description of the palace of Digenis Akrites in the Byzantine epic of the same name. For him the frontier epic, written between 1042 and 1054 or even earlier, which takes place almost entirely in Armenia, was inspired by the palace of King Gagik, now destroyed, and the relief sculpture on the façade of Aght'amar: Anthony Bryer, "Achthamar and Digenis Akrites," *Antiquity*, vol. 34 (1960), pp. 295-297. There is need for more comparative work on the two epics *Sasna tsrer* and *Digenis Akrites*, beyond the Armenian background of the Greek epic as already studied by N. Adontz, "Les fonds historiques de l'épopée byzantine Digénès Akrites," *Byzantinischer Zeitschrift*, vol. XXIX (1930), pp. 198-227. In view of Bryer's position, the possibility that the creators of the Armenian epic were inspired by the sculptures of Aght'amar and the destroyed palace of King Gagik, that is the reverse of my suggestion in the *Ararat* article, must also be considered.

¹⁴ Srvandztiants', who recorded and published the first version in 1873-1874, says that he had heard of such an epic, but it took him three years of searching before he found someone who could recite a complete version.

In the case of *David of Sassoun* it is difficult to see how the enigma can be diminished or even better understood. The land and civilization that nurtured the tellers of these stories is gone, perhaps forever. The Armenian oral tradition, still robust and viable in the context of a rural, village life of less than a hundred years ago, is like so many other neighboring traditions, dying. The deathblow was administered by the massacres and deportations of the Armenian Genocide of World War I, which uprooted a population that for two millennia had managed to preserve, expand, and transmit orally this literature to successive generations. The agony endures as long as survivors of the Genocide from Western Armenia, from the Sassoun and Moush districts especially, who learned the epic as youths, are alive. The tradition will be definitively buried by the year 2000, when the youngest of the native informants, now in their eighties, will be gone.

From the beginning of our century, scholars accepted this reality and the mystery surrounding the oral transmission to the exclusion of a written version. The officially sponsored ethnographic and linguistic campaigns carried out in even the most remote villages of Armenia in the 1930s and then again in the early 1970s were undertaken as a desperate effort to set down verbatim all versions still remembered by those who took refuge in eastern Armenia as they fled Turkish persecution.

The paradox of the extraordinary longevity of the oral versions of the Armenian epic is that it has provided an inestimably rich legacy to folk literature and an inexhaustible tool for the study of epic literature in general. Whereas epics of neighboring peoples, whether the Homeric poems of the Greeks, the *Digenis Akrites* tale of the medieval Byzantines, the *Shahnameh* of the Persians or the *Sharaf-Nameh* of the Kurds, are studied in the form of recorded manuscript variants usually derived from a single original, *Sasna tsrer* has been accurately recorded in more than a hundred versions in different dialects, providing what might represent the largest stock of primary source materials of any national folk tradition.

How much work there remains to be done! All of the collected variants are still not published in Armenian,¹⁵ and almost none of

¹⁵ Since the writing of these lines, fourteen more variants have been published in vol. III of 1979.

them have been translated into any foreign language. Most scholarship has been concentrated on the homogeneous version of the epic created by the Jubilee Committee organized to celebrate the epic's millennium in 1939. A new wave of scholarship must ignore the official version and use as its starting point the individual variants. For the moment, without translations of the variants, this work can only be done by scholars with a good command of the dialectical Armenian by which the epic was transmitted from generation to generation.

The Official Version

The official version of the Sassoun epic was released in August 1939 in a luxuriously printed and illustrated edition of 10,000 copies with the title *Sasounts'i Davit'*.¹⁶ The work was accomplished by a committee of three from the Academy of Sciences' Language and Literature Institute—professors Manouk Abeghyan, Gevorg Abov, and senior researcher Aram Ghanalanyan. The overall editor was Academician Hovsep Orbeli, later to be appointed Director of the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, who also wrote the long introduction. Each member of the scholarly troika had first hand experience with these epic poems, each had transcribed variants in the field. Abeghyan had already published a long series of major publications on different aspects of this oral literature. Three years earlier in 1936 along with Karapet Melik'-Ohanjanyan, Abeghyan, as principal editor, published the first volume of the variorum edition of variants of the epic; it contained twenty-five versions spoken in the dialects of Van. Its title was *Sasna tsrer*.¹⁷

The committee worked with some sixty-five known variants or fragments of varying numbers of cycles and episodes.¹⁸ Its charge was to create a unified and single epic poem from the versions collected during the previous six decades. Such an undertaking is

¹⁶ Abeghyan, Abov, and Ghanalanyan, *Sasounts'i Davit'*, *Armenian Folk Epic*, *op. cit.*, note 5.

¹⁷ Abeghyan and Melik'-Ohanjanyan, *The Folk Narrative, Sasna tsrer*, *op. cit.*, with a general introduction to the epic, a forward, the geographical locale of the variants, the grammar of their dialects, followed by the text of twenty-five variants.

¹⁸ Abeghyan and Melik'-Ohanjanyan, *Sasna tsrer*, I, p. 43.

near unique in modern literary history. The mysterious, blind poet-reciter Homer is credited with the creation of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in the eighth century B.C., describing the heroic age of the Greeks four centuries before his epoch. Scholars regard Homer as the person who consolidated into singular form the assortment of poetic narratives flourishing in his time. Virgil, under the patronage of Roman emperor Augustus Caesar, produced the *Aeneid*, bringing together and synthesizing in written form the previous, essentially oral, tradition of the origins of Rome. In the Near East famous examples exist from the medieval period. In the tenth century, Firdausi under the patronage of the Ghaznavids, consolidated the Persian epic tradition in the form of the *Shahnameh*, and somewhat later at the end of the twelfth century Shota Rustaveli created the Georgian epic *The Knight in the Tiger's Skin* with the sponsorship of Queen Tamara's court. But most folk epics are anonymous creations: *Nibelungen Lied*, *Song of Roland*, and *Song of Prince Igor*.

No other literary work of such dimensions has remained hidden from scholars and survived only in oral form until the late nineteenth century. Recensions of ancient epics completed in modern times have always been a matter of preparing a text from surviving manuscripts of an essentially unified work; the German, French, and Russian examples mentioned above are model illustrations. The Armenian case was different. There were no manuscripts, just oral transcriptions recorded in villages from the voices of illiterate bards and peasants.¹⁹

The Jubilee Committee was given by mandate the power of Homer, the task to codify the Armenian oral epic or epics into a single work just at the moment when the conditions that nourished the tradition no longer existed and when oral transmission to the next generation had ceased. The creation of a national folk epic brought

¹⁹ I have not discussed the matter of Serbo-Croat epic literature, which like the Armenian remained essentially oral until the work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord in the mid-twentieth century, for which see Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), Adam Parry, ed., *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*, (Oxford University Press, 1971), and Lord, *Epic Singers and Oral Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); the latter two works published posthumously. See the elaborate discussion of the work of Parry and Lord in the article by Charles Dowsett later in this volume.

into being, as a by-product, one more variant, the most uniform and complete of them all. But unlike the experience of the Homeric period, when after their creations the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were transmitted orally for two centuries before being written, the official version of *David of Sassoun* was never intended as an oral instrument. The situation is further complicated when viewed through the optic of the Homeric tradition.²⁰ We have today the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; the earlier tradition of epics, which we know existed, was not passed down except in the most fragmentary way. With *Sasna tsrer*, we have both the official recension and at the same time all, or nearly all, of the divergent variants, with the strange coincidence that the canonized version was produced and published at the same time, by the same scholars, as the collection of the corpus of the different variants that served as its source.

If, under these circumstances, the epic tradition for both the official version and the transmitted oral epics is the same, the variants and the 1939 text are different. If a decision of the Academy of the Armenian Republic has elevated the epic tradition of Sassoun to the stature of the national folk epic for all Armenians, in the absence of any other surviving epic tradition, what then constitutes the Armenian epic? The authentic versions transmitted—to be sure in divergent forms—orally for centuries? Or the Committee of Editors' version? To maintain that they are the same is to ignore the differences in the variants and the synthetic nature of the official version. On a popular level, the need for a single expression of a national ethos is perfectly comprehensible. A text to which poets, composers, and ordinary citizens can turn to as a resource is very laudable. In the popular imagination such a version may in fact have a salutary effect. The Armenian reading public has already become used to the version; it has been the inspiration for diverse artistic and literary works. After half a century the Committee's text has established its place in the homeland and the Diaspora as *the* Armenian epic.

The scholar or literary critic is, however, in a more delicate situation. Studying *David of Sassoun* on the basis of the official text

²⁰ The latter is used here only as a classical example for comparative purposes, because Homer's works have few similarities in content or form with the epic of Sassoun.

is at best an incomplete exercise.²¹ The three major integral translations of *Sasounts'i Davit'*, in Russian,²² in French by Frédéric Feydit,²³ and that of Artin Shalian's in English,²⁴ follow the 1939 version line by line. Thus the latter translators, especially Shalian, do not much question the use of that version for scholarly purposes, but rather insist on the usefulness of their translations for students of epic literature who do not read Armenian. Using only the Jubilee Edition or one of its translations is a perilous act for a scholar; serious work on *David of Sassoun* must take the variants into account.

Already in 1942, Dikran Tchitouny, then residing in Paris, strongly criticized the text of 1939 in the introduction to his own much longer version in seven cycles, the last two extending the epic beyond Lesser Mher.²⁵ Tchitouny's version is also a synthetic

²¹ Leon Surmelian has underlined some of the limitations of the Jubilee Edition: "But I cannot help feeling that the three scholars who worked on this project... paid more attention to linguistic problems, grammatical forms, dialect words, pronunciation, rhythm, spelling, etc.—their specialties—than to structure and plot. These are valuable contributions to a better understanding of the story, but I think the time has come for the 'historical' school to be superseded by the artistic. Now that the linguistic and critical ground has been cleared up—though some problems remain—the poets ought to take over." "Fools of Sassoun," *Ararat, A Decade of Armenian American Writing*, Jack Antreassian, ed. (New York, 1969), p. 391, reprinted from *Ararat Quarterly*.

²² The Russian translation was prepared in 1939 at the same time the official version was printed; the first edition was published in Moscow-Leningrad, a second one was issued in Moscow in 1958. Translations in other languages of the Soviet Union were also published.

²³ Frédéric Feydit, *David de Sassoun. Épopée en vers* (Paris, 1964), published in the UNESCO series of national literatures, a translation of the entire epic in four cycles following the edition of the Armenian Academy of Sciences (Erevan, 1939), including the preface (abridged) of H. Orbeli, pp. 9-34, and an introduction by Feydit, pp. 37-50.

²⁴ Artin K. Shalian, *David of Sassoun. The Armenian Folk Epic in Four Cycles* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1964), a metrical translation of the official version.

²⁵ Tigran Ch'itouni (Dikran Tchitouny), *Sasounacan Epopée populaire arménienne*, "Sasmants' toun" "Sasnay tsrer" kam "Sasounts'i Davit'" *Anounnerov tsanot' Hay zhoghordakan diwzaxnavepin eot'e chiwghin amboghjakan patmout'iwn* (Sasounakan, The Armenian Folk Epic, Known

creation even though the author pieces it together using only authentic lines and sections from different variants—identified line-by-line by precise references to the oral versions with the result, unfortunately, of encumbering the text with a maze of critical notations. Because only a small portion of this text has been translated it is little referred to in subsequent scholarship.²⁶

There has been, to the best of my knowledge, no critical study devoted to the variants of the epic in any language other than Armenian.²⁷ Scholars specialized in comparative literature or ethnography have a rich harvest waiting to be reaped. What kinds of problems need clarification? The second cycle of the official four-cycle version, “Great Mher” or “Lion Mher” or simply “Mher,” provides such a problem. In the introduction to the first volume of variants issued in 1936 under the title *Sasna tsrer*, Abeghyan and Melik'-Ohanjanyan speak of three instead of four generations of Sassoun heroes. “The main heroes of *Sasna tsrer* constitute three generations—Sanasar, David the son of Sanasar, and David's son Mher. In a few variants a second Mher (Lion Mher) is put forth as Sanasar's son, and his own son is David.”²⁸ The basis for their conviction is the corpus of variants. Abeghyan reports that some sixty-five variants were known when the variorum edition was undertaken and that those were identical or contained no new material. In fact the two volumes in three parts published between

by the Names, “Sasmants' toun,” “Sasnay tsrer” or “Sasounts'i Davit',” The Popular Armenian Mythological Epic. The Complete Story in Seven Cycles) (Paris, 1942), the title is in French and Armenian.

²⁶ The late John Boyle did translate several sections (nos. 882-892) from the Lesser Mher cycle of Tchitouny's version; it may be consulted for comparison with other translations: John Boyle, “Mher in the Carved Rock,” *Journal of Mithraic Studies*, vol. I, no. 2 (1976), pp. 107-118.

²⁷ The major Armenian study has not been accessible to me: Arousiak Sahakyan, *Sasna tsreri patoumneri k'nnakan hamematout'youne* (The Critical Comparison of the Variants of *Sasna tsrer*) (Erevan, 1975). For a recent article in English, which was originally to appear in this volume and refers regularly in the development of its thesis to divergences in the variants, see Edward Gulbekian, “The Attitude to War in ‘The Epic of Sasoun’,” *Folklore*, vol. 95 (1984), no. 1, pp. 105-112.

²⁸ Abeghyan and Melik'-Ohanjanyan, *Sasna tsrer*, p. [8].

1936 and 1951 contained only forty-seven variants.²⁹ The internal contents of these forty-seven variants and their division by the scholars into cycles, presumably following the headings of the village bards themselves, reveal a much larger number than the four cycles finally adopted for the official version. Major parts of the epic, episodes such as the marriages of Sanasar and Baghdasar, the meeting of David and Khandout', and the death of David are segregated into separate cycles in the versions that contain them. There are a number of episodes and even cycles in the variants that are left out of the Jubilee edition of *David of Sassoun*.

Scrutiny of the individual stories shows why Abeghyan and Melik'-Ohanjanyan opted for an epic with three generations. Only six of the forty-seven, or thirteen per cent of the variants, contain a cycle devoted to Mher, whereas ninety-five per cent of them (forty-two variants) have a David cycle, fifty-seven per cent (twenty-seven variants), Sanasar and Baghdasar, and thirty-six per cent (seventeen variants), Lesser Mher. The lack of a separate cycle for Great Mher does not in every case mean that he is unknown in the variant, because in some of the defective versions minor references to Mher are made in the course of other parts of the narrative.³⁰

Furthermore, it should come as no surprise that only one of the forty-seven variants contains all four cycles. And just fourteen more variants are composed of any three of the four cycles. Four of the variants have only the "Sanasar and Baghdasar" cycle, while twelve tell only of David; in no variant do either of the "Mher cycles" stand

²⁹ Abeghyan and Melik'-Ohanjanyan, *Sasna tsrer*, p. [43]; vol. I (1936), twenty-five variants; vol. II, part 1 (1944), nine variants; vol. II, part 2 (1951), thirteen variants numbered 10-22; however, counting all variants individually published in various periodicals since 1874, some sixty had been published prior to the 1970s, S. B. [H]arout'younyan and A. Sh. Sahakyan, "Nouveaux enregistrements de l'épopée 'David de Sasun'," *Revue des études arméniennes*, vol. XI (1975-6), pp. 255-267, p. 256.

³⁰ These figures and those to follow were compiled by me after surveying all cycles found in the forty-seven variants published from 1936 to 1951. The final volume of (1979) contains fourteen variants recorded in 1972. Their profile changes some of the numbers of the earlier statistics: Sanasar and Baghdasar, seventy-nine per cent (eleven variants); Mher, sixty-four per cent (nine variants); David, ninety-three per cent (thirteen variants); and Lesser Mher, fifty-seven per cent (eight variants).

alone. These anomalies are sufficient reason to question the fidelity of the official version to the general integrity of the epic or epics. The Sassoun tradition may represent an amalgam of epics as has been suggested by some authorities. "Sanasar and Baghdasar" by general agreement seems to have elements from a much earlier period of Armenian history than the other cycles. In view of such disparities between variants and the final epic, would it not be hazardous for scholars to base their conclusions solely on the 1939 *David of Sassoun* or one of its derivative translations without controlling such conclusions against the variants themselves?

Should not the entire question of whether we are confronted by one Armenian epic in *Sasna tsrer* or a multiple epic tradition be more thoroughly investigated before sweeping sociological, historical, ethnographic, and literary generalization are put forth based entirely on the 1939 construction?

Research into the primary data of this epic tradition is much more complicated today than it was for Abeghyan and his colleagues, because it is much richer. The number of variants has more than doubled. From 1971 to 1973, the Armenian Academy of Sciences, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the publication of the first variant by Srvandztiants' in 1874, authorized its Archaeological and Ethnographic Institute to conduct a series of field surveys in every village and hamlet of Armenia in search of survivors of the Genocide and earlier immigrations, primarily from the Van area, who might still remember the epic or any of its parts.³¹ Eighty-one new variants were collected and a preliminary report was

³¹ Details of the three summer campaigns of 1971-1973 can be found in the report of the principal investigators, [H]arout'younyan and Sahakyan, published originally in Armenian, but later in Russian, from which it was translated into French. A slightly different version in Armenian serves as the Preface to vol. III of the variants: S. B. Harout'younyan and A. Sh. Sahakyan, "Sasna tsrer zhoghovrdakan vepi norahayt patoumnere" (The Newly Discovered Variants of the Armenian Folk Epic *Sasna tsrer*)," *Patma-banasirakan handes*, no. 3 (1973), pp. 224-233. [H]arout'younyan and Sahakyan, "Nouveaux enregistrements," *op. cit.*; Russian in *Sovetskaja etnografija* (1975), no. 2, pp. 80-86; see below for the complete reference to vol. III of the variants, especially the Preface, pp. 7-20.

published in 1973.³² In early 1979, a few months after our David of Sassoun symposium in Fresno, the first group of these new variants was published.³³ The fourteen versions in this third volume brings the total number of those printed in the variorum edition to sixty-one.

The editors Harout'younyan and Sahakyan have followed the identical format as in the three early publications of the series (the two parts of the second volume were published separately), numbering the lines of each variant and the subsections of each cycle. But they make a major change in the internal organization of the individual cycles of the variants. The diversity of different cycles has disappeared. All cycles have been named or organized into one of the four sections of the "official" epic—Sanasar and Baghdasar (with no variant names),³⁴ Mher, David, Lesser Mher—with a single exception of an extra very short cycle ("Hakob") in variant no. 4 in the place of Mher son of David. Even though they are in the same dialects as those in the first two volumes (volume I devoted to Van and volume II to Taron and Moush dialects), there are striking structural discrepancies. Of the original forty-seven variants, only thirteen percent had a cycle devoted to Great Mher, whereas sixty-four percent (nine variants) of the fourteen newly published ones have a Mher cycle. All four cycles are known to four of the new variants, while only one from the earlier group contained them all.

Only a close reading of all the variants and a line by line comparison of the new ones with the old will demonstrate whether we are dealing with a phenomenon created by different rules for editing the transcriptions, a real change in the profile of the new versions, or contamination in the reciters minds between what they remembered from their childhood and what they heard during their

³² See the previous note. The authors report three other variants collected and in part published in 1969-1970, "Nouveaux enregistrements," p. 257.

³³ Vol. III, edited by Sargis Harout'younyan and Arousyak Sahakyan, *Sasna tsrer* (Erevan, 1979), 582, (2) pages, with a forward, pp. 7-20, followed by the text of fourteen variants; the ones included here are from natives of Mok's and Moush, a fourth volume is promised containing the variants collected from natives of Sassoun.

³⁴ In the preface to the volume it is stated that the titles used in the earlier volumes for the major and minor divisions of the epic have not been maintained because they disturb the rhythm of the epic; Harout'younyan and Sahakyan, *Sasna tsrer*, vol. III, Preface, p. 5.

late adult life when the official version became widely dispersed.³⁵ The examples cited above seem to point to a further possibility: the restructuring and selecting of the oral material to conform more closely to the elements and organization of the synthetic 1939 version.

Though only fourteen of the eighty-one new variants were published in the volume, the introduction contains a table showing the dialect used and which of the four cycles—complete or fragmentary—are found in each of them.³⁶ An analysis of this table reinforces the idea of incongruity between the new group of eighty-one variants and the former forty-seven. Sixty-one variants, we are told, have Great Mher cycles, of which thirty-nine have a full cycle and twenty-two a defective one. The change from thirteen percent of variants with Mher cycles in the first two volumes to seventy-five percent among the newly recorded ones requires some explanation.³⁷ Furthermore, the table indicates that thirty variants include all four cycles, twelve of which are complete and eighteen defective, that is twenty-seven percent of the new transcriptions, whereas in the earlier sampling only one of the forty-seven recounted all four cycles. Once again there is the suggestion of conformity in the editing, whether conscious or not, to suit the official version of 1939.

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The scholars and men of letters who originally gathered and edited the earlier variants—Srvandztiants', Abeghian, Garegin Hovsep'ian, Abov, and Melik'-Ohanjanian—provided the details of the lives and background of the reciters, their biographies with place and date of birth, their station in life and their work, the dialect used

³⁵ The later hypothesis, which might seem unlikely since most of the informants were illiterate and claimed to be unaware of the 1939 version, is in part confirmed by Harout'younyan and Sahakyan when reporting the case of the reciter Rasho Mouradyan who in 1972 knew all four cycles, but in 1933, when the epic was first recorded from his lips, knew only two, the David-Mher couple, Preface, *Sasna tsrer*, vol. III, p. 14, or *idem*, "Nouveaux enregistrements," p. 262.

³⁶ Harout'younyan and Sahakyan, *Sasna tsrer*, vol. III, p. 13.

³⁷ Unfortunately, no explanation is offered on this or any of the other anomalies.

in the variant, and how and from whom they learned the epic poem. This information is not only sociologically, ethnographically, and linguistically interesting for the study of *David of Sassoun* and the Armenian oral tradition, but of great interest to comparativists specialized in epic or oral literature in general. Among the great epics, few, if any, have provided such abundant details about how and who passed along the epic tradition. While accumulating the eighty-one new variants in the early 1970s, the investigating team established consistent standards of inquiry about the native informants, the circumstances of their lives, and their avocations as reciters.

Since this interesting data has never been discussed in English, a brief summary will be given. A total of 203 villages and hamlets were visited over the three-year period; sixty-five of these generated the eighty-one individuals who knew the epic in part or in whole, with different degrees of competence and verve. All were either born in Western Armenia under Ottoman rule, fifty-seven from Van-Vaspourakan, including the major centers of Sassoun, Moush, Mok's, Shadakh, Bitlis, or were from families (twenty-four) that had migrated to Armenia from these regions either in 1828-1829 or 1877-1879.³⁸ The large majority was male, but there were nine women who knew the epic, which, added to the four known from the pre-World War II period and the one recorded in California (published for the first time in this very volume), gives fourteen female reciters. Fifty-three had remembered the epic from their youth, but had never recited it before; only twenty-six had narrated the epic before; even the professional bards among them had not done so for thirty or forty years.

If this last fact does not announce the end of the epic and oral tradition among Armenians, then the advanced age of the reciters surely does. In 1971-1973, not one of the eighty-one individuals was under sixty years of age: fourteen were between 60 and 69 years old; thirty-one were between 70 and 79; twenty-six between 80 and 89; seven between 90 and 99; and remarkably, three, two men and a woman, were between 100 and 110 years of age. By their own

³⁸ All were Armenians but one, a Kurd whose family had come from an Armenian speaking village.

admission, the social exercise of family or community gatherings to listen to the story of the heroes of *Sasna tsrer* had died in the 1930s.

The Armenian epic was irrefutably nourished and preserved in the villages, especially among the peasant class. The early investigators already established this. Fifty-seven of the eight-one individuals were peasants, that is, cultivators of the soil, farmers; another seven were agricultural artisans. The remaining seventeen were laborers, servants, and housewives. The storytellers had little formal education. Only seventeen were literate, an equal number claimed to be semi-literate, and the majority (forty-seven) could neither read nor write. The survival of *Sasounts'i Davit'* in an isolated rural environment may in part explain why it was unknown to the Armenian intelligentsia. It may also point to a profound alienation between the culture of the upper classes and clergy and that of the masses.

Most remarkable of all is that the transmitters of the epic believed it to be true. When asked what they thought about the events they were recounting, they responded that the incidents were true and that they never added any personal embellishments. Some said the stories of the epic are true, but some things had been added. Not a single one of the reciters regarded the epic as a tale or a fable. Many, in fact, gave details about certain geographical features they had seen in their youth in Sassoun or the neighboring regions mentioned in the epic. Abeghyan also remarked about this faith among the bards in the veracity of their recitations.³⁹

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It is fortunate, in the last analysis, that the epic tradition embodied in the Sassoun legends has been so carefully preserved. The existence and relative accessibility of the variants attenuates problems scholars may have about the Jubilee Committee's version of 1939. New departures in the study of the epic have been made in recent years, for instance those of Earl Anderson and Leonardo

³⁹ The profile of the storytellers in the last few paragraphs was assembled from the Preface, *Sasna tsrer*, vol. III, pp. 7-20 and the French translation of the same authors' summary article, "Nouveaux enregistrements."

Alishan.⁴⁰ The immense corpus of stories preserved orally by nearly 150 occasional and professional village bards of the adventures of David and the other Sassounites guarantees that the Armenian folk epic will accommodate an infinite number of scholars and researchers ready to help reveal more of its hidden treasures.

⁴⁰ Anderson, "The Armenian Sasun Cycle: Folk Epic, Structure and Theme," *Revue des études arméniennes*, vol. 13 (1978-1979), pp. 175-186, and his article in this volume; Alishan, "The Sacred World of *Sasna Tsrer*: Steps toward an Understanding," *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies*, vol. 2 (1985-6), pp. 107-139, the essay contains three sections: 1. The Hylogenic Heritage of *Sasna Tsrer* and Sacred Creation, 2. The Mithraic Components of *Sasna Tsrer*, 3. The Judeo-Christian Messiah and *Sasna Tsrer*.

SASOUNTS‘I DAVIT‘:
SYNOPSIS OF THE OFFICIAL VERSION
OF THE ARMENIAN EPIC

Dickran Kouymjian

Below is a résumé of the four cycles of the epic *Sasounts‘i Davit‘*, section by section, following the official text of 1939.

Cycle One: Sanasar and Baghdasar

A. The battle against the Caliph of Baghdad.

1. Invocation.
2. The Caliph of Baghdad wants Tsovinar for his wife and threatens her father Gagik, King of Armenia.
3. Tsovinar accepts because she does not want to see her father or his kingdom ruined, but she sets terms that the marriage be consummated only forty days after the ceremony.
4. Tsovinar drinks water from an immortal spring in Lake Van.
5. She becomes pregnant by water and gives birth to twins in Baghdad; the Caliph is angry, but is dissuaded from immediately killing them.
6. The twin boys, Sanasar and Baghdasar, grow up; they cause trouble in Baghdad mostly because they are so physically precocious.
7. When the brothers become ten years old, the Caliph sends two men to kill them, but they are unsuccessful, and the Caliph abjures his earlier intention.
8. In a battle with King Gagik of Armenia, which he loses, the Caliph swears to the gods to sacrifice Sanasar and Baghdasar if the gods will save him.

9. Tsovinar dreams of the danger to her sons and helps them escape.

10. The boys wander to a distant mountain and begin building a fortress; Sanasar hunts while Baghdasar builds.

11. Sanasar and Baghdasar give up on the building and wander to Moush and Erzeroum, but are rejected by the rulers of these cities.

12. They are taken in by T'eva-T'oros in Manazkert.

13. After a while they decide to leave and finish their fortress-home; they return with forty families, build houses for them, and finally finish the fortress.

14. An old man names the fortress Sansoun or Sassoun.

15. Through a dream Sanasar finds the marine Colt (K'ourkik) Jalali.

16. The brothers return to Baghdad and capture the Caliph.

17. Sanasar saves Baghdasar, who has been tricked, and then kills the Caliph.

18. Sanasar and Baghdasar leave Baghdad and go with their mother Tsovinar to their grandfather, King Gagik; they ask and receive land from him; Sassoun prospers.

B. The marriages of Sanasar and Baghdasar.

1. Invocation.

2. The daughter of the King of Copper City, Golden Hair of Forty Braids, the daughter of the King of Spirits, writes a letter to Sanasar, but by mistake Baghdasar receives it.

3. Baghdasar is angry and feels deceived by his brother; he wishes to fight him.

4. The brothers fight and make up; Baghdasar recognizes Sanasar's superior strength.

5. Sanasar goes to the land of the King of Spirits in search of Golden Braids.

6. K'ourkik Jalali jumps the wall and Sanasar steals the special apple and mace from the tower.

7. Sanasar goes before the king and performs heroic feats; he is then forced to fight the forty braves (*pehlevans*); he comes in danger.

8. Baghdasar sees that Sanasar's special ring has turned

black and he goes to help him; Baghdasar defeats the rest of the *pehlevans*; the king then insists the brothers must go to the Green City.

9. There, they kill the threatening dragon, and Baghdasar receives a girl he saved as his betrothed.

10. Sanasar and Baghdasar then go to the castle, defeat the monster Hamtol, and escape with Golden Braids.

11. They release the forty suitors of Golden Braids; Sanasar fights his future wife; both brothers are married; Baghdasar goes to Baghdad and remains childless; Sanasar has three sons: Vergo, Tsenov Hovan, and Mher; Sanasar and Tsovinar die; Uncle T'oros, Golden Braids, and the three sons live.

Cycle Two: Mher the Great or Lion Mher

A. Mher the Great administers Sassoun and marries Armaghan.

1. Invocation.

2. Initially Forty Golden Braids rules Sassoun.

3. Msra Melik, who was a neighboring ruler, allies with the Caliph of Baghdad. Upon Sanasar's death he marches on Sassoun, which becomes his tributary.

4. Young Mher hunts animals with his bare hands and is called *tsour*, literally "crooked," different than normal.

5. Mher asks Gorkik of Bitlis for a colt.

6. He receives the colt.

7. He carries it home on his shoulders.

8. Uncle T'oros grooms the horse and Mher rides and hunts with it.

9. Mher fights and kills a lion by tearing its jaws apart; he comes home a hero and his mother gives him K'ourkik Jalali and Sanasar's sword called Lightning.

10. The family goes to T'eva-T'oros of Manazkert to ask his daughter Armaghan as wife for Mher, but they are told that his daughter is in the hands of Siptak Dev, the lord of Akhlat.

11. Mher goes to meet Siptak's men who speak against their master; Mher resolves to go to Siptak's mountain.

12. Mher finds the cave where Armaghan is hidden, while Siptak Dev is away at Black Mountain; however, Mher finds Siptak

Dev's special black ox and kills it.

13. Mher finally fights and kills Siptak Dev even though the latter's body is made of dough.

14. Mher marries Armaghan in Sassoun and afterward kills the *devs* of Akhlat.

B. Mher the Great defeats Msra Melik after which they make a vow. Msra Melik dies, whereupon his wife Ismil Khatoun tricks Mher into a union from which is born Msra Melik junior.

1. Msra Melik challenges Mher to a fight.

2. They face each other.

3. Mher wins and they reconcile; Msra Melik gives up the collection of taxes on Sassoun and the two vow to take care of each other's families if one or the other should die.

4. Sassoun flourishes under Mher.

5. Msra Melik dies and Queen Ismil Khatoun, who wants a child from Mher, invites him to visit her.

6. Mher decides to go to Ismil to be faithful to the vow made with Msra Melik; Armaghan swears she will not sleep with Mher for forty years if he goes.

7. Mher's relatives advise him not to go; the clergy and ministers of Sassoun, on the other hand, tell him to go and extend the kingdom of Sassoun.

8. Mher leaves despite Armaghan's threat.

9. Ismil intoxicates Mher and sleeps with him; she keeps him drunk while she has a baby, which she names Msra Melik.

10. During seven years Mher is befuddled by wine; but one day he hears of Ismil's intentions to harm Sassoun; he returns forelorn and cognizant that he has given Meser an heir while Sassoun still remains without one.

11. Armaghan will not accept him back.

12. The *vardapets* reduce the vow of forty years to forty hours; Armaghan conceives; Mher goes to Mount Sassoun and builds a monastery which he calls High Mother of God of Marout'a; Mher and Armaghan die; Golden Braids names her grandson David and raises him; Sassoun mourns the death of Mher; David is raised as an orphan.

Cycle Three: David of Sassoun

A. David's youth and his fight against Msra Melik.

(Subsection I: David's childhood in Meser)

1. Invocation.
2. David is sent to Meser for nursing by Queen Ismil, the mother of his half brother Msra Melik junior.
3. For the journey he is tied to K'ourkik Jalali.
4. Ismil accepts David.
5. Msra Melik tries to keep K'ourkik Jalali, but he escapes.
6. The horse returns to Uncle Hovan in Sassoun and tells him the boy David is safe.
7. Very quickly David turns away from Ismil's breast; honey and milk are brought from Sassoun to feed him.
8. Msra Melik, taking advantage of Mher's death, sacks Sassoun and makes it a vassal state; Vergo and Hovan are allowed to return to Sassoun and the former is made governor; David causes mischief with the local boys in Meser.
9. David, who is confined to a dark room by Msra Melik, plays with sunbeams.
10. David is let into the city; he catches Msra Melik's javelin during a contest and throws it farther than he.
11. Ismil asks Msra Melik to take David with him when he plays.
12. David is tethered on top of a mountain during the games, but he breaks loose and goes down to watch the tournament; Msra Melik tries to have his *pehlevans* injure David, but to no avail.
13. David kills five of Msra Melik's *pehlevans*; when Msra Melik threatens to kill him, David runs home to Ismil.
14. Msra Melik tells his mother he is going to kill David; Ismil pleads with him not to.
15. David is put to a test by the rulers of Meser to see if he is behaving out of innocence; he is guided by an angel to choose putting a burning coal instead of gold to his mouth, thereby convincing Ismil of his innocence; he burns his mouth and lisps thereafter and is called "Lisping David."
16. David plays with Msra Melik's mace; the latter threatens

to kill David, but his mother cautions against it.

17. David is sent off to Sassoun without having to pass under Msra Melik's sword as a sign of obedience.

18. Two *pehlevans* are sent to kill David.

19. Back in Sassoun, Uncle T'oros sadly waits for David's return.

20. The Sassounites living in Meser warn Uncle T'oros that David is in danger.

21. T'oros goes to Meser where he is told by Msra Melik that David died three days earlier.

22. As for David, he travels back with his guards, Bat'mana Bugha, and Ch'arbakhar Wind, who want to kill him.

23. David vanquishes them and sends them back to Msra Melik with a blood soaked shirt as proof of David's death.

24. Uncle Hovan has a dream and wakes his wife to tell her that David has returned to Sassoun.

(Subsection II: David the Shepherd)

1. An exhausted David returns to Sassoun.

2. David, while playing with the prominent town boys, unintentionally hurts them.

3. Tsenov Hovan makes David a shepherd.

4. David herds other animals along with the sheep.

5. David keeps herding these animals despite Hovan's instructions.

6. David returns the sheep and the other animals to the villagers who make use of them.

7. Next, they try to make David a cattle herder; but this time he herds wild animals along with them.

8. Unable to do his work correctly, David is told by Hovan to go where he pleases.

9. David is returned home to his Uncle T'oros.

10. David again herds animals at Siptak K'ar, where he makes friends with other herdsman.

11. Through his prowess, David saves many animals, endearing himself to the people.

12. While David is getting kettles of *harisa* (a meat porridge) for the shepherds on the Feast of Assumption, forty *devs* steal forty cattle from the herd.

13. David kills the forty *devs* and finds a treasure in their cave.

14. David returns to the city with the treasure.

15. The citizens of Sassoun accept the wealth brought by David and the city prospers.

(Subsection III: David, turned hunter, rebuilds his father's monastery and destroys the army of Kholbashi)

1. David becomes the head of his household; he meets an old widow and finds his father's bow.

2. Hovan's wife Sarye secretly covets David; David exposes her.

3. David inadvertently destroys the field of the Old Woman who tells him of the pleasure park at Tsovasar now under Msra Melik's control.

4. Uncle Hovan takes him to Tsovasar, but it is surrounded by a high wall, which David destroys; he lets all the wild animals go free.

5. David spends the day there and in the middle of the night follows a light which leads him to an indistinguishable flame; he descends to tell his uncle.

6. He goes back with his Uncle Tsenov Hovan, who tells him that is the spot where his father Mher is buried and where he built the monastery of the High Mother of God of Marout'a; David decides to rebuild the monastery with the help of workmen.

7. Tsenov Hovan gathers the workers and they rebuild the walls.

8. At night David dreams that the High Virgin of Marout'a tells him that he will find all the construction of the day undone and that he must rebuild the walls with his sword placed under the foundations and after its construction hold a mass; the monastery is rebuilt and David places Ch'arbakhar Wind as its guardian.

9. David builds a bridge.

10. Msra Melik hears of David's deeds and sends Kholbashi to pillage the monastery.

11. Kholbashi is unable to harm the monastery, but, by a trick, while David is away, succeeds in entering the monastery, killing the clergy and sacking it.

12. David, drunk from his imagined victory over Kholbashi, only slowly comprehends the disaster which has befallen Marout'a.

13. He goes after Kholbashi, slaughters his troops and sends him back to Msra Melik; David returns to Sassoun.

(Subsection IV: David punishes the tax collectors of Msra Melik)

1. Msra Melik sends Kozbadin, a *pehlevan*, to pillage Sassoun and kill David.

2. Badin, Kozbadin, Sudin, and Ch'arkhadin set out for Sassoun.

3. At the approach of the representatives of Msra Melik, David's uncle Hovan sends him away, and then goes to the treasury with the *pehlevans* to pay the tax.

4. While hunting, David is told of this by the Old Woman.

5. David goes to the treasury and defeats the *pehlevans* and their troops.

6. He sends Kozbadin and his three companions back to Msra Melik, but sets free their army.

7. Kozbadin and his companions return to Meser humiliated.

8. Kozbadin finally reports the defeat to Msra Melik.

9. Msra Melik sets out to kill David, but is warned by his mother Ismil that he cannot.

10. Msra Melik holds a war council and marches on Sassoun.

(Subsection V: The duel between David and Msra Melik)

1. Msra Melik gathers an army from the four corners of his realm.

2. Ismil Khatoun has a dream that Sassoun's star will rise and Meser's will dim; Msra Melik sends a letter inviting David to fight, but Tsenov Hovan intercepts it.

3. Uncle Vergo decides to get David drunk while he bribes Msra Melik not to attack.

4. But the weeping of Sandoukht, Uncle T'oros's wife, awakens David.

5. David goes to Tsenov Hovan and asks for weapons and a horse; the Old Woman tells David about the existence of the sword called Lightning and K'ourkik Jalali.

6. David goes to Tsenov Hovan, who is forced to bring the weapons out of hiding under the door post.

7. In the stable they get K'ourkik Jalali and David receives the famous battle cross.

8. David is dressed and mounts his horse in preparation.

9. David leaves for battle.

10. Golden Braids talks to K'ourkik Jalali and entrusts David in the horse's care.

11. David goes to Tsovasar with K'ourkik Jalali and drinks from his father's fountain of milk.

12. David tests his strength on the iron testing stone and succeeds in cutting it.

13. David meets Msra Melik's army and puts it to rout; Msra Melik remains in his tent.

14. David is duped into dismounting and is plunged into a deep pit where he is bound.

15. Tsenov Hovan finds K'ourkik Jalali who had escaped when David was caught; he goes to the spot where David is captive and gives a powerful yell; David hears it and breaks his bonds.

16. Msra Melik is challenged and strikes the first powerful blow, but David resists.

17. David takes his turn and despite Msra Melik's elaborate protection cuts him in two.

18. Ismil tells David to take Msra Melik's wife and rule Meser, David refuses, saying he has fulfilled his father's vow; he gives the land of Meser to Ismil and returns to Sassoun.

19. A feast is held for David and he takes his father Mher's room for his own.

B. David and Khandout'

(Subsection I: David's marriage)

1. Tsenov Hovan's wife tries to seduce David, but

unsuccessfully; the Old Woman says David should get married; Tsenov Hovan asks the hand of Ch'meshkik Sultana for David.

2. David's fame spreads to Kapout Kogh and King Vach'oy-Marjoy's daughter, Princess Khandout'; she sends bards to sing to David of her beauty, but David will not receive them; T'oros, however, after hearing them, has them beaten up.

3. David meets the battered bards on the road; they tell their story and sing the praises of Khandout'; David is determined to go to see Khandout' and announces to T'oros and his wife that he is breaking the engagement with Ch'meshkik Sultana to go to Khandout'.

4. On his six day journey to Blue Rock David eats all the food of a group of ploughmen but then does six days of ploughing for them in one day; on his way he passes Ch'meshkik Sultana, is beguiled by her, and sleeps with her.

5. David approaches the gate of Princess Khandout' guarded by Gorgiz, he is invited in the garden where he allows his horse to roam freely; Khandout' is outraged by his behavior and sends instructions that he should leave; David refuses.

6. David receives an apple from Khandout' as a token; this angers her forty suitors who have been waiting for seven years without ever having received a sign; they decide to harm David after getting him drunk, but Gorgiz and Khandout' awake him from his drunken sleep.

7. David enters Khandout''s rooms and kisses her three times, once on the breast; in anger Khandout' slaps him; David leaves, but Khandout' chases him barefoot; David takes pity on her and returns to her palace.

8. The Pope of the Franks, instigated by King Shapouh of Persia, sends a threatening letter to David, which is intercepted and answered by Khandout'; in her response she says he had better not come alone against David, but the Pope of the Franks marches against David, warning him of his imminent arrival.

9. Seven kings—Pope of the Franks, King Shapuh of Persia, King of China, Black King, King of Oghan-Toghan, King of Aleppo, King of Landband—come to seize Khandout'; the forty knights refuse to help her; David goes out to fight the armies and says, if I am not back in three days, come and get my body.

10. David finds the enemy asleep, wakes them, slaughters

the Kings of Oghan-Toghan and returns to Khandout' to fight again the next day.

11. The enemy holds council; the King of Aleppo is sent to Sassoun to ask Hovan for a valiant warrior to fight his enemy; Vergo's son Astghik is sent to fight David without knowing who he is; David recognizes his cousin and tries not to kill him, but in the end by mistake does so and faints from the experience; the enemy try to take advantage of David, but K'ourkik Jalali protects him; David defeats the army.

12. Because David had not returned, Khandout', dressed as a warrior, goes to find him; the unknowing David fights her and throws her to the ground; she explains to him that she had taken a vow only to marry the man who could throw her to the ground.

13. After three days they head toward Sassoun, but on the way pass by Ch'meshkik Sultana who says to David, "You promised to marry me and we exchanged rings, but instead you took Khandout'; we must fight, either you die or I die"; David promises to come back in seven days, but at Sassoun there are seven days and nights of celebration of his marriage to Khandout', and David forgets his promise.

(Subsection II: The birth of P'ok'r Mher and the death of David)

1. David announces he is going to Gurjistan to marry off the forty *pehlevans*; Khandout' says she is with child; David leaves and arranges the marriage of the *pehlevans*.

2. P'ok'r Mher is born to Khandout'.

3. David is away for seven years and the children of Sassoun call P'ok'r Mher a bastard; Mher goes looking for his father and meets him on the road with a young girl, but they do not recognize each other; they fight until they are separated by the angel Gabriel; David in anger invokes God that P'ok'r Mher become deathless and childless.

4. David returns to Sassoun, but his battle cross has turned black; remembering his promise to Ch'meshkik Sultana, he goes to her, but his own daughter by Ch'meshkik shoots him with a poisoned arrow and he dies.

5. Khandout' jumps to her death from the top of the citadel;

David and Khandout' are buried at the monastery of Marout'a at Tsovasar.

Cycle Four: P'ok'r Mher

A. P'ok'r Mher avenges the death of David.

1. Invocation.

2. Mher, because he was carousing, did not know of his father's death; Tsenov Hovan summons him with his voice; Mher sings a long lament at their tomb.

3. Uncle T'oros, Tsenov Hovan, and Mher are betrayed by the abbot of Matnavank', but destroy the army of the seven kings and punish the abbot.

4. Back in Sassoun, Mher is given the weapons, including the Lightning Sword, the clothes of his father David, and the colt K'ourkik Jalali; Mher and his uncles march against Ch'meshkik Sultana at Akhlat, and avenge David's death.

B. The marriage and death of P'ok'r Mher.

1. Mher journeys to King Pachik's realm and covets his daughter Gohar.

2. Dressed as a boy, Gohar challenges Mher to a contest; Mher wins, realizes who his opponent is and a few days later marries her; but Gohar says she will not sleep with Mher until he kills the King of the West; with the help of K'ourkik Jalali he slaughters the king.

3. Tsenov Hovan sends word to Mher that the grandsons of Kozbadin are threatening Sassoun; Mher defeats the four, after which he meets the forty *pehlevans* from Aleppo who report that their sister has seized the throne; Mher kills her, but refuses the crown of Aleppo offered to him.

4. Mher goes to Baghdad to visit the tomb of Baghdasar and from there to Jezira where he stops a flood; he returns to King Pachik and finds that Gohar has died leaving a note asking to be buried beside Khandout'; at the grave at Marout'a, he hears his mother say: "Go to the Crow's Rock for it is your haven"; he hears the same at his father's tomb. Mher goes to the Vostan pass where he is caught

by the prince of the city; he asks God for a challenge, in response to which seven angels are sent against him; he is unable to smite them with his Lightning Sword for the ground will no longer sustain him; Mher strikes the Crow's Rock as a test of his guilt; it splits open and Mher and K'ourkik Jalali enter; the rock closes behind them; Uncle T'oros dies of grief when he hears of Mher's confinement.

Epilogue:

Twice a year the rock splits open; Mher cannot come out as long as the world is wicked and the ground is false; only when "the grain of wheat grows to the size of a rose-hip and the barley to that of a walnut, can he come out."

Invocation.